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Military History: A Selected Bibliography

Williamson Murray

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INSTITUTE FOR DEFENSE ANALYSES

Karl H. Lowe, Director – Joint Advanced Warfighting Program

April 12, 2004

All professions can learn from their histories, the profession of arms more than most. The centrality of life and death issues is one reason. Another is that in spite of rapid and persistent introduction of new technologies, some aspects of the profession change much more slowly. The dynamics of human and group behavior in combat is a prime example.

Military historian Wick Murray has prepared this bibliography as a guide to the vast body of military histories in existence today. We are making it available to those in the Department of Defense and the Services who feel that history can shed some light on the problems they confront today.

I invite your comments and feedback, which should be directed to:

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Preface

This paper was prepared under the task order Joint Advanced Warfighting Program (JAWP) for the Director, Defense Research and Engineering in the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics. JAWP is making it available to individuals in DoD and the Services who feel that history can shed light on the problems they confront today.

The JAWP was established at the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) by the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Staff to serve as a catalyst for stimulating innovation and breakthrough change. The JAWP Team is composed of military personnel on joint assignments from each Service and civilian analysts from IDA. The JAWP is located principally in Alexandria, Virginia, but includes an office in Norfolk, Virginia, that facilitates coordination with the United States Joint Forces Command.

This paper does not necessarily reflect the views of IDA or the sponsors of the JAWP. Our intent is to stimulate ideas, discussion, and, ultimately, the discovery and innovation that must fuel successful transformation.

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Military History
A Selected Bibliography

This bibliography is derived from the substantial literature on European and American military history. The works were chosen for a variety of reasons: quality of scholarship, point of view, subject matter, and readability. The list is not exhaustive but aims at providing those interested in particular areas of military history or theory in general with a guide to the available literature.

The books are categorized into sections according to period and subject matter. Books marked with one or more asterisks (*) are particularly worthy of note or attention, with the more stars the greater the book. For the convenience of the reader, I have pulled the five-star selections into their own chapter at the beginning of the bibliography. These represent an "essential" library for the warfighter, scholar, or student of military history.

1. The Essential Military History Library

Because of its very nature, a list of the twenty-five most essential books in military history will reflect the prejudices as well as the idiosyncrasies of its author. Not all of the books on this list represent an easy read; I have chosen them for their depth of insight and their understanding of the wider issues involved in war. And many of the books that I have given four stars could arguably have been included in the five-star list.

Above all, this list is aimed at helping the interested reader develop a reading program that extends his or her understanding and comprehension of that terrible, yet intriguing, human phenomenon that is war. I have listed the twenty-five books in chronological order: any ranking system of their relative worth would be hopelessly pedantic.

Ancient Warfare to 500 AD

Thucydides. History of the Peloponnesian War. Translated by Rex Warner. The Warner translation of Thucydides is the most eloquent, but the reader might also consider using *The Landmark Thucydides*, edited by Robert B. Strassler, which contains outstanding maps. One of the ironies of the writing of military history is that the greatest book on war ever written was the second history[1] ever written, namely, this work. Thucydides examines the great themes of war from the highest levels of the making of strategy and policy to the moral dimensions and the sharp end of battle. Few military historians have done it as well, none better. There are, however, difficulties. Reader must take their time in reading this work. They must familiarize themselves with the geography of ancient Greece. And they must also take care to understand who the players are. Finally, what appears to be an archaic device, the speeches, contains the crucial arguments over the strategy, policy, expediency, morality, and the nature of war.

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[1] Herodotus's history on the wars between Greece and Persia (499–479 BC).

Victor David Hanson. The Western Way of War, Infantry Battle in Classical Greece. Hanson has written a number of important and interesting historical studies. But this is by far and away the most important and interesting of his works. *The Western Way of War* is the finest book on the sharp end of combat ever written by an historian—even better than John Keegan's *Face of Battle.* This is a book the success of which entirely rests on an extraordinary familiarity and use of the available sources to create a picture of war in classical Greece that is clear and lucid. Hanson's book is an imaginative understanding of a form of warfare and society that have not existed for two and a half millennia. It also suggests that the Greek way of warfare has informed and influenced the "western way of war" ever since. A must read for the military professional as well as for the reader interested in military history.

The Eighteenth Century (1686–1789)

Winston S. Churchill. The Life of Marlborough. Four vols. This work on Churchill's great warrior ancestor, John Churchill, the Duke of Marlborough, represents the finest piece of writing and analysis that Churchill was to do in his long and productive life. It is eloquent, sweeping, and magisterial, as only Churchill can be. Modern scholarship has indicated flaws in the great man's analysis, but what makes this such a brilliant work is the fact that Churchill understood how great statesmen and generals interacted, since he was one himself. This is rousing, thrilling military history, written in a style that made Churchill arguably the greatest writer of English prose in the nineteenth century. Its power of analysis and understanding also underlines how Churchill was to be such a crucial figure in the winning of the Second World War.

Fred Anderson. Crucible of War, The Seven Year's War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754–1766. Anderson examines the Seven Years War (known to Americans as the French and Indian War) from the highest levels of strategy and policy to the impact of chance and friction on human affairs. This is a work of great eloquence and deep insight. It underlines the contingency of human affairs and the flawed reaction of human beings under the terrible pressures of war. In the end Anderson explains how and why the British were able to win so decisively and to suggest how the very decisiveness of that victory would inevitably set the stage for the American Revolution.

General Works: Military Theory and Strategy

Carl von Clausewitz. On War, translated and edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Of all the books written about war, Clausewitz's *On War* represents the most ambitious effort ever made by a theorist of human conflict to systematize war and understand it for what it is. Because its author died before it was completed, *On War* does have some rough patches, and portions of it are no longer relevant to the modern world. Nevertheless, much of it is entirely relevant to the modern condition. It does require that the reader examine its concepts, ponder its arguments, and test its ideas against the laboratory of war, namely military history. Above all, it deserves to be reread again and again to draw out its wisdom.

Peter Paret. Clausewitz and the State. The book is a study of intellectual and social history as well as the influences that led Clausewitz to produce *On War*. It sounds like a recipe for an incredibly boring book; it is not. Paret lays out in a clear even-handed narrative Clausewitz's life and the influence that eventually led him to produce one of the few theoretical studies of war that is worth reading. For readers interested in serious military history as well as in understanding the writings of the great Prussian theorist, this is the place to start.

The French Revolution and Napoleon (1789–1815)

Leo Tolstoy. War and Peace. The very size of one of the greatest novels ever written presents the reader with a formidable challenge. For military professionals with little time on their hands, the challenge is even more daunting—especially since the bulk of the novel has little to do with war but rather the social interactions that take place within a family. But the two sections dealing with the Austerlitz campaign and the 1812 campaign represent a brilliant and eloquent examination of war by a great novelist and former combat officer. My feeling is that Tolstoy's depiction of the Battle of Borodino in 1812 and the events leading up to that terrible battle is the finest piece of fiction about war ever written. And even if the reader disagrees in the end with Tolstoy's pacifism, the novelist's arguments are well worth considering.

The American Civil War (1861–1865)

Ulysses S. Grant. Personal Memoirs, 2 vols. Most memoirs by generals are filled with lies, deceptions, and half-truths. Grant's memoirs represent one of the few exceptions to that rule, being honest, deeply insightful, and a brilliant piece of writing. Mark Twain argued that Grant's memoirs were the greatest piece of English litera-

ture written in the nineteenth century. (He may well have been right.) Grant wrote these memoirs in the last two years of his life when he knew he was dying. His style appears to be simple, direct, and honest. In fact, it contains sharp and deep observations on the character of his contemporaries and opponents as well as the basic issues involved in the Civil War. The *Memoirs* are a must read for anyone who considers himself or herself as a serious historian of the American Civil War.

James M. McPherson. Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era. There are relatively few books that through their eloquence, their depth of knowledge, and their breadth of vision manage to overturn the generally held conceptions about an historical period. McPherson's study of the Civil War is such a work. In the largest sense, McPherson entirely overturns the idea that the antebellum South was a society on the defensive against the swelling tide of history. Rather its very aggressiveness contributed mightily to the outbreak of the war. What makes this a particularly compelling book is McPherson's ability to interweave military events with the political and strategic context of the war. After Grant's memoirs, this is the greatest book about the American Civil War. *Battle Cry of Freedom* won its author a Pulitzer Prize but the contempt of his colleagues because it was popular with the general public.

General Works: Military Theory and Strategy

Michael Howard. War and the Liberal Conscience. Michael Howard is the premier military historian of the twentieth century. He is the only author with two books on this list[2]In this work he examines the intellectual framework that has made war such a difficult phenomenon for the West, particularly in liberal Britain and the United States, to come to grips with. This is intellectual prose at its best. And Professor Howard is truly one of the magisterial writers of the English language. This work represents a brilliant examination of an intellectual framework that has increasingly dominated the Western world, best exemplified by the 1933 Oxford Union motion that there was no cause worth fighting for, including king and country.[3]

The First World War: Literature

Frederic Manning. The Middle Parts of Fortune. Michael Howard considers *The Middle Parts of Fortune* to be the finest piece of literature written about war. So do I. It

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2 The other being volume 4 of his *Grand Strategy, August 1942–August 1943.* See page 6.

3 "That this House will in no circumstances fight for its King and Country."

is set on the Western Front in one of the great killing battles of 1917. The author catches the dialect and the language of his soldiers in a fashion that few authors have been able to do. It is a grim tale, made even grimmer by the death of its hero. And it captures the sound and landscape of the war that in its course led to the development of modern war. It is a great but depressing read.

Vera Brittain. Testament of Youth. Few books cover the impact that war has on women and their lives better than this memoir of the First World War. At times Brittain's account is overly long, and her account of her post-war efforts in pacifist causes detracts from the terrible sense of tragedy and loss that hangs like a dark angel over her account of the war. The author was admitted to Oxford just before the war broke out, but then volunteered to serve as a nurse. During the course of the war she fell in love with several young men. They were all to be killed, as was her brother. No other author has managed to convey the sense of loss at the death of one's companions and lovers.

The Interwar Period (1919–1939)

Allan R. Millett. In Many a Strife, General Gerald C. Thomas and the US Marine Corps, 1917-1956. This is a first-rate study of the life of one of a cadre of marine officers who made the US Marine Corps a fourth service. At one level it is a wonderful study of the life of a brilliant staff officer and commander. But at another level it is an insightful study into what at its heart the profession of arms has come to represent. It is the finest piece of military history that Millett has written in his long and productive career.

The Second World War: General Works

R. V. Jones. The Wizard War: British Scientific Intelligence, 1939–1945. R. V. Jones was a young scientist at the beginning of the Second World War who became the head of Britain's effort in scientific intelligence. His memoir is a brilliant piece of writing and analysis that brings a deep understanding of the development of wartime science and the business of intelligence to the reader. In the end, Jones contribution to the winning of the war ranks only slightly below that of Churchill's, and yet his telling of his contribution is modest and self-effacing throughout. In every respect this is a wonderful book.

MacGregor Knox. Mussolini Unleashed, Politics and Strategy in Fascist Italy's Last War. In this extraordinary study of Mussolini, MacGregor Knox lays bare

the extraordinary details of the incompetence of Italy's military institutions that sacrificed the lives of innumerable brave Italians in the Second World War. It also entirely destroys the myth that Italy's entrance into the war was foisted on an unwilling Italian people by Mussolini. For readers who want to understand why the military institutions of the Third World have so often collapsed on the battlefield before the institutions of the First World, this is an enlightening study.

Gerhard Weinberg. A World at Arms, A Global History of World War II. This political and strategic history of the Second World War stands as a monument to brilliant scholarship that has made Weinberg the greatest historian of the Second World War. Quite simply, no historian in the future is likely to master the documentary evidence to the extent that Weinberg has managed to do. While the length of the work may intimidate many readers (along with the extraordinary footnotes), the book presents the most balanced account of the war yet written. *A World at Arms* is solidly written, but it is the mastery of the details and of the complexity of the war at every level that makes this such an outstanding work of history.

The Second World War: Strategy

Michael Howard. Grand Strategy, vol. 4, August 1942–August 1943. Rarely does official history rise above a standard of average. In this case Michael Howard has not only written the definitive history of British grand strategy in the crucial period between 1942 and 1943, but he has done so with style and panache. Where by its very nature official history tends to be partisan in attributing most errors to Allies, Howard is scrupulously fair in his treatment of the American side of the story. For those

The Second World War: Air Power

Sir Charles Webster and Noble Frankland. The Strategic Bombing Offensive Against Germany. Three vols. As with Michael Howard's official history of the Mediterranean Theater in 1942 and 1943 (*Grand Strategy*), Webster and Frankland have written brilliant piece of official history in their account of Bomber Command's valiant but fundamentally flawed conduct of its bombing offensive against Germany. When it was published in the early 1960s, it raised the hackles of airmen for the rigorous standards of truth with which it told its story. This is superb military history, and while its length may be intimidating, it reads easily and well with extraordinary analytic power. No one can call himself or herself a student of air power unless they have read the three volumes in this history.

The Second World War: Memoirs, Diaries, Biographies, and Literature

George MacDonald Fraser. Quartered Safe Out Here, A Recollection of the War in Burma. George MacDonald Fraser is the author of the innumerable volumes in the Flashman series. In this memoir he recounts his experiences as a teenaged combat infantryman, serving in William Slim's 14th Army. His tale is brilliantly written—at times sad, at times gripping, at times hilarious, but always readable. Fraser's powers of observation are extraordinary, as well as his ability to sum up a point in a few words. His description of Slim is brilliant. In addressing his men and the Burma campaign after the war, Slim "never said I, rarely said we, and almost always said you did."

William Slim. Defeat into Victory. Besides Ulysses S. Grant's memoirs, Slim's memoirs ranks as one of the great works of military literature, both for its insights as well as for its honesty. And like Grant, Slim has few pretensions about his own "greatness." Instead he tells how he took a beaten and demoralized army and rebuilt it into one of the finest military organizations in the Second World War. He then recounts his conduct of the war and the re-conquest of Burma against the odds of weather and tenacious resistance of the Japanese. It is a great tale told by one of the great captains of history. And in the end it is about a great *leader.*

E. B. Sledge. With the Old Breed at Pelilu and Okinawa. E. B. Sledge survived two of the nastiest battles of the Second World War and returned to Alabama to serve his community as a professor of chemistry. He also wrote one of the finest accounts of combat ever written. *With the Old Breed* is a story of leadership, comradeship, and marines under the terrible circumstances of combat against a fanatical opponent. It is a great piece of autobiography and a tribute to the marines who fought in these terrible battles.

The Second World War: The War at Sea and in the Pacific

Richard B. Frank. Downfall, The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire. Richard Frank survived a combat tour in Vietnam with the 173rd Airborne Division. He returned to the United States to become a lawyer. He has also become a first-rate military historian. His study of the surrender of the Japanese Empire as a direct result of the dropping of the atomic bombs quite simply destroyed fifty years of academic nonsense written about the atomic weapons. Thoroughly researched and

clearly written, *Downfall* is brilliant military and political history. It is a must read for anyone interested in the history of the Pacific War.

The Second World War: Intelligence (1939–1945)

Patrick Beasley. Very Special Intelligence. This memoir of British intelligence and its efforts to thwart the submarine war waged by the gray wolves of the *Kriegsmarine* is not only a wonderful memoir of Bletchley Park, but an insightful and persuasive account of the complexities and difficulties of understanding one's opponents in war. Beasley underlines that it was the *understanding*, not just the broken codes and technological superiority, that was the key ingredient in the Allied victory in the first great information war. This is a great read that offers the reader much for little effort.

War and Strategy Since 1945

Alistair Horne. A Savage War of Peace, Algeria, 1954–1962. Horne is a great historian of French military history and its less-than-successful record over the past 130 years. Horne's greatest book is an examination of France's great military victory in the Algerian War and its disastrous political defeat—a defeat that almost destroyed France. It is a tale that American strategists and military leaders should ponder as the American military embarks on wars against enemies about whom it knows little and understands less.

Lt. Gen. Harold Moore and Joseph Galloway. We Were Soldiers Once...and Young, Ia Drang — The Battle that Changed the War in Vietnam. Moore and Galloway have written by far and away the best piece of military history on one of the early battles of the Vietnam War. It is a story of effective and ineffective military leadership. It also should put to rest the claims of some commentators who claim that the US military lost none of the battles in the war. LANDING ZONE ALBANY was nothing other than a defeat that came close to being the twentieth century's Battle of the Little Bighorn. This is a great book.

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12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT

Military historian Williamson Murray has prepared this selected bibliography as a guide to the vast body of military histories and as a reading program that could extend our understanding and comprehension of that terrible, yet intriguing, human phenomenon that is war. JAWP is making it available to those individuals in DoD and the Services who feel that history can shed light on the problems they confront today. The bibliography is derived from the substantial literature on European and American military history. The works were chosen for a variety of reasons: quality of scholarship, point of view, subject matter, and readability. They are categorized by period and subject matter, and given a rating by the author. The first chapter contains an annotated list of twenty-five books that Dr. Murray considers essential to the library of a warfighter, scholar, or student of military history.

15. SUBJECT TERMS

Bibliographies, concepts, history, military history, military theory, military strategy, war, World War I, World War II.

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